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ABSTRACT

Studying the writing strategies used in advertisements helps students discover that rhetorical technique and patterns of development are not a system of arbitrary rules, but a means of achieving specific and real effects. By analyzing its purpose, audience, persona, and argumentative content, students learn how each element contributes to an ad's total impact. They can discuss the effectiveness of different types of evidence and the various modes used to develop advertising arguments. In addition to recognizing the use of analogy, comparison and contrast, and other modes, students can find examples of faulty argumentation in advertisements. They can develop a greater sensitivity to the importance of word choice after studying the "weasel words" and glittering generalities used to sell many products. Having familiarized themselves with ad techniques, students can use them to write essays on advertising. In an especially effective assignment, students design an ad for a nonexistent product and then write an essay analyzing what they did and why. Besides offering a stimulating way of teaching rhetorical strategies, this unit on advertising increases student sensitivity to the audience's needs, a quality necessary in any effective writing. (MM)

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Selling the Brooklyn Bridge:
What the Essayist Can Learn From the Advertiser

Students today are bombarded by advertising appeals everywhere: on radio, tv and movie screens, as well as in posters, magazines, and newspapers. These items compose the media that, in turn, constitute the major portion of their language experience—not literature, although we still seem to wish for that. But rather than bemoan the decline in reading, we ought to pay attention to, and use, what we have. And in advertising we have a very powerful aim of discourse—that of Persuasion. Effective advertisers selling their products are really little different from effective writers selling their ideas. Their purposes are essentially the same: to present a point; their techniques are alike: building upon and developing a main idea; and their results, if successful, are similar: a public has "bought" something.

My purpose, of course, is not to somehow "cheapen" a writing product by equating it with commercialism. Rather, I'd like to point out what we can point out to our students: that writing is not a lot of rules tossed out at them by English teachers, but the result of a series of logical decisions made with a purpose behind them. The focus, then, is not "What is the rule behind writing this?" but "What is the point behind writing this?" Students need to think about what they are trying to "sell" and to whom—just like the advertisers.

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We see all around us that advertising does, indeed, accomplish its aim, and we can help students take advantage of advertising in a way far different from what Madison Avenue ever intended. They can use it as a guide in tailoring their prose to certain "markets" and in selecting effective patterns of development. In this way, students not only become involved in their work, but in their world as well. Since they tend to mimic what they are exposed to, we should get them to truly think about what they are doing and what they are copying. Writing about advertising can act as a cognitive bridge allowing students to gain power over, and knowledge of, advertising. The power they gain is an awareness of rhetorical principles, learned experientially rather than as a list of abstractions. And this knowledge of advertising then undergoes fuller integration through the very experience of writing, as Janet Emig has shown. Using advertising to teach composition, then, builds on and extends Emig's insight by allowing for a rhetorical experience that unifies content and form in dynamic action.

Using advertising as a teaching tool requires examining the ad for both its subject matter and its method of construction. This lends itself most easily to a focus on audience--advertisers seem to know that they can't "fool all of the people, all of the time," and so are very careful about pitching certain appeals to certain audiences. This concern with audience can be smoothly integrated with a discussion of Hairston's rhetorical square: a diagram suggesting that a piece of prose is constructed through attention to four points: 1) the persuasive purpose; 2) the audience; 3) the writer's persona; and 4) the content of the argument, the supporting material. By examining the way in which an advertiser creates an ad to appeal to a targeted audience, students observe the effect and importance of knowing one's audience in communicating an idea. Those "picayune" items, then,

that our students accuse us of harping on, such as informal vs. formal tone, logical vs. emotional reasoning, and thesis support and use of examples, are seen to indeed be not only "requirements" in an assignment, but useful and helpful elements in constructing written communication. Writing is then transformed from a set of prescriptive rules into a series of intelligently informed choices. In advertising, students can see rhetorical concerns and methods graphically illustrated. Not only does advertising clarify these concepts, it also gives them added import as students realize that they have been affected by the use of the concepts. Consequently, the transfer of those techniques used by advertisers into the students' own writing assumes added interest since their use so obviously exists in the students' world.

But you can't simply rely on student recall of ads they've encountered. They need to see and examine an ad--critically. If you do not have access to any of the anthologized essays on advertising that suggest various methods of analyzing ads(categories of display; appeals to feelings; use of American cultural myths; or use of propaganda devices, for example), you can simply take an ad and ask the students to analyze it in terms of the rhetorical square(for purpose, audience, persona, and argument content): the purpose and audience will most readily be found. The content of the argument will come next. Interesting discussion often results as students become aware of the fact that frequently the overt argument is not synonymous with supporting material. An ad for McDonnell Douglas, for example, features a headline statement: "The more you learn about our DC-10, the more you know how great it really is." But the so-called facts then given are non-substantive: "18 million engineering man-hours were invested," but that doesn't necessarily mean the result was successful, and the "fact"

that the plane "passed structures tests just as demanding, in their own way, as those required of U.S. Air Force fighter planes" suggests a standard that actually is not used. You can use this as a focus on thesis-support, and on clear writing vs. persuasive writing vs. propoganda. The writer's persona is generally more difficult to determine, but can usually be found if you switch to looking for the image the company is projecting. But our purpose here really is to concentrate on development and audience—who they are and how that guides the advertiser in constructing the ad.

After the audience has been determined, or as part of that determination, students need to explore the stereotypes and assumptions being made about that audience: their educational, social, and political background; age; occupations; geographical location; hobbies and interests; etc. Depending on the product(and audience) these and other assumed traits will be of greater or lesser importance. Liquor ads, for example, don't usually care about geographical location, but do make assumptions about upward mobility, money, and sex. Wolfschmidt Vodka combines all three by showing us a Russian Czar and Czarina: she, resplendent in her jewels, sitting on the floor, playing with four puppies; and he, wearing his medals, standing proudly next to the mother of the pups. Tobacco ads, on the other hand, frequently focus on the clean woodlands of the northwest, or most famously, the open, rugged west of the Marlboro man; they never seem to show people enjoying cigarettes in smoke-filled rooms.

You are then ready to have the students identify what has been done in the ad to cater to such stereotypes as class, occupational interests, or hobbies. You can break this down and concentrate on various elements, both as suits your purposes and as demonstrated in the ad(an ad that is comprised of a photograph and one phrase won't help much in demonstrating levels of language, although it can call attention to emotional appeal and the use of transfer).

Language is, perhaps, the easiest item to deal with. You can look at tone, although there don't seem to be great differences in ads-- most seem to be informal as the advertiser tries to establish intimacy with the audience, most often by addressing "you" and inviting participation. For example, the Salem Cigarette man asks, "How come I enjoy smoking and you don't?" Roche Vitamins is almost conspiratorial: "If you don't want to quit smoking or drinking, shouldn't you at least replace the vitamins you may be losing?" A more powerful—and nearly universal—presence is that of so-called "weasel words"—terms that lull us into believing something but which, upon inspection, make no commitment: How clean is "virtually" dirt-free? If it "helps" get rid of dandruff, how much? A little help? A lot of help? Is a product really better if it is "new and improved" rather than just "improved"? And how much can you improve upon parity products like soap? Other common weasel words are: "can be", "up to", "as much as", "acts like", and "works against." These terms point out the importance of even the smallest units in conveying meaning—or seeming meaning, at any rate. Students need to determine what is being promised to the audience and then extrapolate why. A Pilot pen ad for a new Ball Liner pen mocks old movie posters in an attempt to look different and uses those old cliched glittering generalities: "See the ball liner float across the page in elegant 'fountain pen-like' strokes!"—although we're not told how much "like" the fountain pen it is. Or, "Karvel as the ball liner recaptures all the grace of those great pens of yesteryear with the convenience of today's marker pens!" and "Be amazed as the fine and medium point ball liners write through carbon paper just like a ball point!" Apparently there is little new to recommend the ball liner. Nostalgia is what is being sold here—we're to buy the new pen because it is so much like the old. The advertiser is hiding behind phrases which sound good, but say little

Language can also be examined within the larger context of the development of an argument. What and where is the thesis? It's frequently in the headline, although the headline more often functions as a hook pulling the reader into the thesis. Our eye is usually grabbed when we see such arresting adjectives as: "free", "new", "suddenly", "now", "announcing", "introducing", "just arrived", "amazing", "sensational", "remarkable", "revolutionary", "miracle", or "magic." The great variety and wide use of intensifiers almost seems parodic when listed, but they may serve as a jumping off place for a discussion on the life span of words. For example, why these words so quickly lose their punch and die. How do other phrases and the copy in general support the thesis? Do they bring in new ideas or simply re-phrase the headline? Is the supporting material supportive? Or does it use emotional appeals and take us off on tangents which invite us to make associations that do not exist? Dannon Yogurt advertisers, for instance, provide a full page photo of an old woman eating their product; the caption says, "One of Soviet Georgia's senior citizens thought Dannon was an excellent yogurt. She ought to know. She's been eating yogurt for 137 years." We are to believe that yogurt may extend our lifetimes, but obviously there are other factors which have influenced her longevity. And we don't know what she's comparing Dannon to—perhaps it is only "excellent" because what she's been eating is so poor. Logical fallacies and faulty reasoning such as this may be identified in examining the copy, along with such propaganda devices as glittering generalities, name-calling, transfer, testimonial, plain folks, card-stacking, and band wagon appeal.

The ad should be examined in its entirety, so photographic elements and the over-all construction also require attention. What does the photograph or illustration do? How and why does it appeal to that specific audience? What's there and what's not? How are the models posed? Where is the product place

Where is the photograph on the page? Where is the copy? Is it all in one place or are phrases scattered here and there? If you are dealing with a magazine ad this focus on layout may be especially important; since we usually flip through them, material close to the bound edge will not be as readily apparent, and lots of small words won't grab us as quickly as a big, bold headline; just as you don't want to bury important information in an essay way at the end, where it will be missed if the reader tires before getting there.

All of these items combine in making up the pattern of development of the argument, and the ad can be examined for the method it uses to do so. Is it based on evidence; presenting statistics, testimony, or authorities? Does it try to build an analogy? (Kennen cologne, for example, is "the gold standard of men's colognes"). Perhaps it uses illustration or example: GM ads tell us how to do things; for example, "How to Foil a Car Thief." Coca-cola takes advantage of cause and effect: "Have a Coke and a smile." Virginia Slims patterns its ads on comparison and contrast, providing photos of similar situations, then and now, and then explaining how, "You've come a long way, baby," while car ads compare standard and optional equipment. Ads sometimes define: Excedrin asks, "When is a headache The Excedrin Headache?" and then has four different people each give an example of when. And ads frequently define us by giving us models of behavior and being: the Marlboro Man ads make use of attributing characteristics, and Wolfschmidt Vodka shows, and tells, us what macho and sophisticated are: the Czar drank this vodka and, "Regal coaches carried him in elegance, but with his Cossacks he rode like thunder. Hunting wild boar in the northern forests, hosting feasts for a thousand guests in the Great Palace . . . ." "The spirit of the Czar lives on"—in Wolfschmidt Vodka and if you drink it, obviously you have the same spirit (pun intended).

Once students are familiar with the techniques of ad construction, you can make the shift to essay construction. As subject matter, you can make ads the basis for essays exercising various skills:

——an analytical essay based on, for example, 1) who the audience is; 2) why the ad uses the method it does; or 3) how the language reinforces the topic.

——a comparison/contrast essay based on ads for different products but aimed at the same audience; or ads for the same product but targeted at different audiences.

——a classification essay based on a set of ads according to a specific principle or system (use of cultural myths or display techniques, for example)

——a definition essay based on the images of a group or concept presented in a collection of ads (What do cigarette ads define women as? or, When is the appropriate time to drink beer? when you've earned it(Budweiser); on weekends(Michelob); or when you're with friends and the night is kinda special(Lowenbrau).

——a descriptive essay based on the way the ad is laid out: where the copy and photo are and what's occurring in that photo.

One assignment based on explanation and yielding excellent results is adapted from Ohlgren and Berk's text, The New Languages. . The student creates a non-existent product and then designs an ad for it; the essay is an explanation of how and why the ad was created the way it was. This particular assignment solves the problem of invention, which took place before the composing process even began, and allows the student to focus on rhetorical features such as language choice, and idea development. This assignment truly does let the student practice what you've been preaching, but even more, allows him to experience it. In an unpublished paper,

Kathleen Blake Yancey and I determined that this particular assignment not only reinforced the notion of audience, but that students at all ability levels could succeed with the assignment, and that those students who chose this option for their papers did better than those who chose other assignments. The content of the assignment has the advantage of being "different," purposeful, and the student's own.

As a method of teaching, you can take nearly any topic and ask students to address their writing to a specific audience(for example, a college brochure for parents), after having first jotted down what they think the characteristics and interests of that audience are and making notes on how to play to those interests; persuasive, propagandistic, and argumentative papers are a natural here, but descriptive, narrative or process papers could also be used. Or, asking for two short papers on the same topic but addressed to different audiences(one brochure for parents, and one for students) encourages students to apply and use their awareness of audience, while it also graphically illustrates to them their increasing capability to produce whatever kind of prose a situation might call for.

In understanding how an advertiser sells his product, students gain control over how they are manipulated in the marketplace. And in their writing about advertising, they learn how to analyze who they are writing to and what rhetorical choices they must make in order to get their message across to that audience most effectively. This ability to appeal to specific audiences is all too often overlooked in our teaching, although its importance keeps popping up in professional journals. Most recently, in the October 1982 issue of 3Cs, Robert R. Bataille, in "Writing in the World of Work: What Our Graduates Report," found from a survey of graduates in six disciplines that, "writing for people outside one's field is also

important, perhaps more so than is often realized; it is a fact that would compel a writing teacher to place a great deal of emphasis upon careful analysis of audience," (278) He discovered that approximately 54% of all writing in the "world of work" is "directed at people beyond the writer's own field" (278) which causes Bataille to recommend that, "We should keep on stressing the importance of audience in the writing process, particularly the necessity of writing for audiences who may know little or nothing of our subject," (279). Examining advertising stresses that importance of audience. In this way, students learn not only ad construction, which makes them more knowledgeable consumers, but they also learn essay construction, which makes them better producers of effective prose.

Beyond that, and that really is enough by itself, I've found that students year after year tell me that this section of the composition course was the most interesting and the most fun—and that they now found themselves paying more attention to ads they saw and read, trying to determine how the advertisers were manipulating them. They come away with the ability to effectively structure their prose according to what they wish to accomplish and they come away feeling that this English course was related to the real world and gave them something they could use concretely. Advertising helps their writing, their analytical skills, and their attitudes toward English. In this new "me" generation, they tell me they share what they've learned with their friends and recommend the class to them—can we ask for more?